

# The Impact of Parachurch Activities on Our Congregations

[Arizona – California Pastoral Conference, Tempe AZ, October 29-31. 1985]

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OWLS

Creation Science Society

High School Auxiliary

Support Group for Parents of the Handicapped

Men's Prayer Breakfast

Bible Camp Committee

Lunch Hour Bible Study

Adult Enrichment Seminar

Pioneer Council

Multi-Parish Chorale

Lutherans for Life

Bowling League

Immigrant Sponsorship

LWMS

Neighborhood kindness

AAL

Area Federation

High School Association

Personal Convalescent Visitation

Alcohol Awareness Group

Area Institutes

Neighborhood Weekday Bible Story Hour

Christian Solo Parents Group

WELS Pastors Wives

Christian Businessmen

Gideons

American Bible Society

Fellowship of Christian Athletes

Heifer Project

LLL

YMCA

Campus Crusade

Young Life

Navigators

Jews for Jesus

WCTU

## THE PARACHURCH AND THE PARISH

### Thought Starter

1. A member asks for materials to help him with his noon-hour Bible study group at work.
  - You offer to participate as observer.
  - You offer to participate as leader.
  - You offer to meet with him regularly to provide ideas and materials.
  - You encourage him to expend that effort as a teacher in the Sunday School.
2. The conference camp corporation wants to enlist your congregation's manpower for 4 Saturdays to upgrade equipment, inspect campsites, and to plan an appeal for funds to produce top-notch publicity and promotion effort. The dates conflict with planned neighborhood outreach effort.
  - You go through the motions of announcing the request.
  - You lead your men in establishing priorities.
  - You list all the numerous appeals for manpower and money, and you lament.
  - You ask to speak to the camp director's meeting.
3. Several ladies ask about publicizing their plans to have a divorcees' and single parents' get-together for mutual support and encouragement.
  - You rejoice that something is being offered, and you suggest names to be included.
  - You ask about aims and objectives.
  - You delay, because you don't know what to say. You wonder about supervision.
  - You ask if neighboring congregations can be included.

4. Men of your Pioneer council ask for postponement of a church council meeting because an area rally has to be held that Sunday.
  - You encourage the council to meet as scheduled.
  - You write a letter to headquarters.
  - You express your consternation and pontificate about priorities.
  - You are glad to be able to participate in the rally.
  
5. A member asks for materials left over from the congregation's visitation program to leave with residents at a convalescent home where she and a neighbor call on friends and lead some hymn singing.
  - You offer to take over.
  - You ask your elders to supervise.
  - You gladly consent.
  - You hesitantly consent.
  
6. The Wisconsin Lutheran High School Alumni Assn. wants one of your members to direct a thorough and energetic publicity and fund-raising effort among the Alumni in Calif.
  - You are glad one of your members is called on to render more significant service in the kingdom.
  - You advise the member to ask to be excused; our own high school needs support, not competition.
  - You protest that "they" ought to consider what's best for the kingdom.
  - You wonder how to direct your member's eagerness to serve the Lord in this way.
  
7. The OWLS ask you to conduct a Seminar at their retreat, set for the weekend your congregation holds orientation and planning sessions for faculty and staff.
  - You ask your faculty members to rearrange their schedules.
  - You offer to meet with OWL reps and guide them in conducting their own seminar.
  - You deplore the proliferation of para-parish groups, and bow out.
  - You offer to put your presentation on videotape.

## **I. THE STATUS OF THINGS**

It is not only we Evangelical Lutherans who are expressing concern about the relationship between the parish and the parachurch, as a look at recent book titles and magazine articles will confirm. Prominent concerns for others are the competition for money and manpower, as well as questions about "theological legitimacy," i.e. under whose authority must a Christian function in the exercise of his or her universal priesthood? In addition some raise questions about effectiveness, stewardship of gifts, and duplication of efforts. To all of these you and I would add questions relating to the demonstration of fellowship and to the matter of the call into the public ministry.

There is lack of clarity in the matter of terminology. "Church" in "para-church" cannot designate the Una Sancta; no activity by Christians is outside or along side the Una Sancta, the composite of all believers. It is not only Lutherans who recognize this; many others also speak of the invisible Church. The only other application of "church" many of them recognize is the local congregation. For them "Para-church" can mean only para-local congregation.

You and I who endorse the thought that the Gospel seeks its own forms realize that "church" can be used as a designation for groupings of Christians other than the paradigm "local Congregation," such as representatives of congregations coming together to carry on the work of the Lord that none of them

could very well carry on alone. Along side of church in this sense “para-church” could mean only totally private endeavors, spawned entirely outside the circles of our organized congregations and conferences, Districts and Synod.

Since this assignment was first conveyed to me as: “The Impact of Parachurch Groups on our Congregations,” I take it that the point of view is to be a contrast between congregational life and para-congregational activity, and for that reason, as well as for the sake of clarity, we state that our definition of “parachurch” for this essay will be para-local-congregation.

As evangelical Lutherans we are spared one aspect of the question that very much concerns other denominations. Proceeding on the endorsement of immediate calls and the subjectivism that goes with that approach, churches of other denominations are surrounded by movements sparked by energetic individuals that take upon themselves a high profile ministry paralleling and competing with the work of the churches. Take for example an independent evangelicalism crusade. Augsburg XIV “... no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called” spares us from being expected to endorse the self-appointed prophet’s work. But there is a valid concern about how we respond to people who properly seek endorsement before proceeding with plans to try to fulfill a need they see beckoning for attention. That brings us to a factor in

### **THE PROLIFERATION OF PARACHURCH GROUPS**

A member sees a need for an ethnic Saturday school in his aging neighborhood. Another conducts a drop-in nursery service out of her home and sees an opportunity to teach Bible stories. Still another feels an affinity for troubled teens and would like to enlist help in setting up a support program through which they could be led to know Jesus.

Many congregations would not be supportive of such innovations. This may account for an energetic Christian seeking like-minded people to take up the project on their own and bringing into being a parachurch activity.

Christians have gifts and they are motivated. A number are eager to serve in a way more significant than ushering or stuffing envelopes. Who of us is not familiar with a scenario like this: A bright, joy-filled new Christian, a recent young adult convert perhaps, asks to talk with you and informs you he wants to serve the Lord. You try to encourage him and direct him to DMLC to be a teacher or into the Bethany program, but for various reasons he doesn’t fit into either. Alternatives? He could work with the youth group two Sunday nights a month. Or: You learn that he has gone off to a heterodox Bible school to prepare for lay ministry among the ski set, his peer group before his conversion.

Along the same lines: We observe men of our fellowship leaving the pastoral ministry to prepare for a ministry of counseling—a paraparish activity. Needs and inclinations are the factors.

There may be others less noble: An over-rated self-assurance and self-confident impatience with the ministerial training track; an independent spirit bent on making a religious mark; or a mistaken assessment of needs clamoring to be met. But since we can’t look into people’s hearts, for the purpose of this essay let us assume we are dealing with people whose motivation is right and genuine. Our churches often are not able to employ their gifts and motivation to the fullest within the existing congregational structure.

A much more rounded youth program, more highly developed ministry to the elderly and shut-ins, a more satisfying employment of musical talents these may be among the “perceived needs” that spawn specialized parachurch activities.

The fact is the number is increasing. Let’s take a look at

### **Some PROS**

Some views:

Parachurch activities reach people who would otherwise be neglected or missed.

We're breaking out of the "Sunday-Christian" syndrome. There is more to being a Christian than just showing up on Sunday and avoiding the gross sins during the week.

There are things that *Christians* ought to be involved in which the *Church as such* is not commissioned to carry on – such as the battle against abortion in our country or the battle against infant mortality in Africa. There is a need for parachurch functions. The salt is not to be kept in the salt shaker.

How do Christians help resettle refugees, except through some parachurch involvement?

The cross is getting into the market place, and not being kept on the church steeple.

We're coming to realize that the church is something you *are*, not just something you *come* to.

Finally we are exercising the universal priesthood more purposefully and consistently.

If friendship evangelism is a parachurch activity or not, it is what ought to be going on. The most effective evangelism is not by church programs but by Christians' penetration of the world.

People say: "Our church doesn't have much of a youth program because we have so few active youth." The parachurch mind says: "Look at all the youth around us. Why can't some of us be engaged in efforts to reach them outside the church—in order to bring them in—and have a worthwhile youth program in the church too."

We're supposed to let our light shine—not only in the church where the Light already is, but out where it's dark.

To build a case for the parachurch motivation, one assumes that the long-range view always is to bring and/or to keep the people involved under the means of grace in a congregational setting. That, of course, is basic to our view. There are also other concerns, which draw attention to

### **Some CONS**

In 1923 John Brenner began a *Quartalschrift* article with this concern: "Organizations are multiplying rapidly among us." Some quotes (hopefully not misrepresented out of context): (*QS* Vol.20. [Oct.1923])

The Church has no other mission than the edifying of the body of Christ and no other means than the Gospel of Christ. p. 275.

Numbers do not count. p. 275.

To the man who had been freed from the devil the Lord ... said: "Go home to thy friends ... " Jesus sends him to his home to begin his work there; and it is in our home where we ought to begin our work . p. 276.

We cannot without serious apprehensions see how clubs and societies flourish while the home languishes. p. 278.

The Gospel unites in the home church all Christians living near each other. p. 279.

... everything a congregation does within its calling, belongs to the work of edifying the body of Christ. And in this work all members share. p. 280.

Read Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12 and Eph. 4. [Everyliving member's] service does not in the first place belong to the church at large. God has led him into this particular home church and has thereby called him to serve there. p. 281.

So there are today tasks the individual congregation is not able to perform alone.... the Gospel has brought into existence our synod. p. 281-282.

We can conceive of but one cause that could compel a Christian to undertake public (organization work is public work) Church work, the persistent neglect or refusal of the Church to do its duty. p. 287.

... does any member see an opportunity for real service to which others still are blind: tell the brethren in the congregation and in the synod. Surely there is no immediate demand for a special organization. p. 288.

The birth of the Lutheran High School of Milwaukee is an instance of this kind. p. 288.

Our churches, we are convinced, are well able to do their work without any outside help. p. 288.

At the best an organization serving a general cause is like a crutch ... needed only by one who is crippled or weak. p. 289.

Without wanting to disparage ... sincere efforts ... we frankly state that we are of the firm conviction that the road to a healthy church life leads away from these aids and back to the home and the congregation. p. 289-290.

We certainly should not follow the trend of our times in encouraging the home to delegate its duties to some one else and thus contribute toward the present disintegration of the home.... We should devote far more attention to the building up of Christian homes.... But if we are going to do this, it will become necessary to eliminate from our church life many of the activities that are now found there. p. 293-294.

To gather a few about some special interest, no matter how good and pure that interest may be, means, in a way, to separate them from the rest; and that not without practical results. Take, for instance a mission society or *Schulverein*. It is fine that the members take an interest in missions and in the school ... it is their duty to create the interest in those who have it not. Satisfied with

working together with kindred minds, they are inclined to forget the weak brother; and he will easily content himself with letting others do his share. p. 294-295.

Brenner also touches on some “practical” aspects such as organizations eroding sound stewardship principles by money-making activities; undermining regard for the home church by “attractions;” embarrassing the pastor by advocating interests and priorities other than those he has established for his flock, and especially devoting time and effort to non-spiritual endeavors.

Here is his conclusion:

#### IV. What should be our attitude toward these organizations?

- 1) While gladly recognizing the good intentions and the earnest zeal of the brethren in (these organizations, we should frankly point out to them the dangers that may arise for our church from these activities and should in all love and patience show them the right way to serve the Church.
- 2) We should see to it that the existing organizations are properly supervised so that they remain within their bounds and are kept free from all objectionable features.
- 3) We should advocate that those activities that properly concern the Church be assumed by the congregation.
- 4) It should be our constant endeavor to enlist the interest and the service of all members for the work of the congregation and the synod.
- 5) As little as it can be our purpose to work for the immediate dissolution of these organizations, so little can we, on the (other hand, lend ourselves to their insistent and unhealthy propaganda.

J. BRENNER.

In the middle 30's the Walther League was having a push for increased membership. With that in the background E. E. Kowalke takes up the cry: “We must do something special for our youth to keep them with the church.” He establishes that fun and companionship are adiaphora. But the line between what is edifying and not edifying shifts. “What is an adiaphoron today in one place, may be a denial of the faith tomorrow in another situation.” (*QS*. Vol. 34 [Oct. 1937] p. 251.

Then he gets into the matter of “Unite the Youth Movement.” He raises a concern about being interested in meat that perishes, rather than the Bread of Life. But as specific dangers he lists three:

- 1) separate movements are a threat to the unity of the Church.
- 2) active, well-organized groups instill in their members a wrong conception of their calling before God. “The vocation of youth is not to assume leadership in the church ... unless they are properly called to do so.” p. 258.  
Self-appointed leaders are called busy-bodies in Scripture, not servants.” p. 259.
- 3) a false conception of what constitutes church-work, substituting pep and publicity for the quiet working of the Spirit.  
“We do not need a new program, but we may need to carry out neglected parts of the old program.” p. 260.

His suggestions for areas of improvement:

- 1) Improve our sermons.
- 2) Improve family life.
- 3) Improve the early training of children.

- 4) Improve our schools.
- 5) “Build up in every member of the congregation, young or old, the feeling of unity in the congregation. The *Church* [Emph. mine, R. H.] is compared in the Bible to the human body in which all the members are nicely fitted together, all coordinating beautifully in the welfare of the body. It is one of the most distressing features of our church-life that this feeling of unity is so rare. Fostering organizations and societies of certain members within the body will make it rarer.” p. 262.

Contemporary non-Lutheran voices are making some of the same points and others:

Parachurch organizations fail to see the big picture; they develop tunnel vision as they specialize.

There is a lack of balance and of concern for the whole spectrum of Christian (and church) responsibility.

There is a tendency to cater to people with an aversion to the total program of the congregation.

If they do develop interest in the full spectrum of church responsibility they tend to become defacto denominations.

There can be duplication of effort which is poor stewardship.

A question very prominent in this whole matter is that of accountability. Enthusiasm for a cause may be commendable, but it can also blur judgment about expenditures and needs—both in regard to funds and in regard to other resources. On what basis other than enthusiasm do parachurch organizations set their budgets? And how much authorization or limitation is to be exercised in the matter of the parachurch coming to the church(es) to underwrite their budget? Are parachurch groups free to set budgets on their own and then in effect compete with the church for members’ offerings? Dealing with these questions heightens the concerns related to principles mentioned above, and together they tend to polarize even more reactions to the parachurch.

Let’s consider the pros and the cons in the light of Scripture and history, also taking into account what may be the influence of our traditions.

## **II. A BASIS FOR EVALUATION**

### **Scriptural sedes for the role of the local congregation are:**

Acts 2:42-47 with emphasis on the fact that the Jerusalem Christians “devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” The paragraph ends: “And the Lord added to their number daily ...” This is preceded by: “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.” The point for our consideration is that apparently what they did in homes had significance along with what they did corporately.

Acts 6:1-6 The Jerusalem Christians select seven to administer the daily distribution.

Acts 14:23; 20:28; and I Peter 5:2 Elders are appointed to a flock.

Revelation 2 and 3 presents the letters to the seven congregations, but little in them enlightens us for our topic, other than that there are references to the evil factions which some of the congregations are to deal with.

I Corinthians 10 and 11 present the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

I Corinthians 12:13,14 revolve around coming together for edification and exercising the Spirit's gifts.

Colossians 3:16 pictures the activity of the believers gathered at one place: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

In II Corinthians 8 and 9 there is the matter of the Corinthian congregation gathering a charity offering—to be administered by a para-parish committee from Macedonia).

Matthew 18 is the classic section on church discipline administered by "the church." We note, however, that to begin with it is an exercise of private Christian concern for winning back a fellow sinner. And "step 2" involving several others, is not yet an action authorized by the congregation. The 2 or 3 who now go to "establish the matter" are a sort of para-church function.

The issue of "busybodies" comes up for attention. In II Thessalonians 3:11 and in I Timothy 5:13 the word is applied to people not primarily because their activity is not authorized by a congregation, but because its character is wrong. I Peter 4:45 "meddler" (NIV) the context indicates people whose not so much in respect to lack of authorization but in respect to its nature. The dictionary suggests: "one who pries into another person's affairs." We should think twice before applying the Biblical term merely when the intent is to fault an activity just because it is unauthorized by a congregation.

### **Some Additional Observations**

The congregation(s) at Rome seem to have been founded by non-Apostolic activity as a result of "para-church" activity of some of converts.

In Acts 8:1-4 "All except the Apostles were scattered those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." This sounds spontaneous, not like a function organized and directed by the Jerusalem leadership.

Within the Ephesian church(es) there was the church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, I Corinthians 16:19. Again, within the Roman church(es) there was a church in the house of Aquila and Priscilla, Romans 16:15. Should they be regarded as patron saints for the para-local congregation movement?

We really don't know enough about the life of the local congregations in respect to the house churches in their midst's to rule out or to establish that the latter can be considered a para-church functions.

In the letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle, Prophets, etc. whom Christ gives to His Church are in context gifts to the Una Sancta, not just to a local congregation.

Similarly in Romans 12 the gifts of the Spirit are given to believers as members of the Body of Christ; the gifts, to be sure, are exercised in visible local congregations. There does not, however, appear to be a limit confining the exercise to that circle. We would be hard pressed to say that gifts for the Body are to benefit only a given parish. Or to put it another way: Are the gifts given to a member in Christ the possession of his local congregation?

Then there is the matter of many common encouragements and exhortations given to Christians in general, some of which we cite:

Let your light shine. Matthew 5:16

Show forth His praises. I Peter 2:9

Clothe yourselves with Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Colossians 3:12

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. I Peter 4:10.



Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. I Peter 3:15.

It is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. I Peter 2:15

These encouragements take the exercise of the universal priesthood beyond the safe and comparatively comfortable circle of the local congregation, and can call for Christian words and deeds to be spontaneous – and apart from congregational consideration or endorsement. Granted, this does not necessarily call for a para-church *organization*.

Going further: Believers ought to be active in programs of charity and responsibility, activities which are not mandated by Christ in his Commission to His *Church*. Some things that are the business of *Christians* are not the business of the *Church* or the churches, In this area why should not a believer link arms with another believer in a para-church group, provided that other principles are not violated or priorities neglected?

Looking at the life of the believers in the first century through the pages of Scripture leads to the observation that by comparison today's universal priesthood seems paralyzed or crippled in the exercise of its calling, with its privileges and responsibilities.

Perhaps we have to some extent throttled the exercise of the universal priesthood as a result of dealing with the *called public* ministry as a ministry *in concreto*, against a background in which we deal with the ministry of Christians in general (the universal priesthood) as a ministry only *in abstracto*. We say the keys are given to the universal priesthood, but then move on immediately to establish that this makes the called ministry valid. We seem to neglect or shy away from developing the ministry of every priest.

In emphasizing correctly the doctrine that the *public* ministry must *be called*, we may be neglecting the Scriptures that declare the universal priesthood *is called*.

To make things worse, if "*public*" ministry is understood as everything that is open to observation, an uneasiness may prevail that causes shepherds to muzzle the sheep and inhibit the exercise of the universal priesthood. A Christian church member who is interviewed for publication by a man-on-the-street program and gives testimony about his (or her) personal trust in Jesus is not involved in public ministry.

*Public* ministry is the exercise of the Keys or the Administration of the Sacraments in the name of a congregation. Scripture doctrine not only needs to be in harmony with Scripture, but also appropriately applied.

Does the point we have just made indicate that 25 laypeople from a number of congregations may properly get together and form a Sacramento Area Lutheran Publicity Association, rent a hall, hire a band, and conduct a Reformation Rally? I would say that it would be an adiaphoron, but just because a thing is an adiaphoron, doesn't make it right. WELS people need to be reminded that after one determines a matter to be an adiaphoron, he is not free to do it until he has considered: Is it beneficial for everyone involved? How does it affect the Body of Christ? Brotherly consultation ought to be able to handle the matter. "All things are possible, but not all things edify."

If para-church activities were not adiaphora, we would not have the question before us; we would have the answer in advance. The only question to deal with would be: How to exterminate them.

There is some perspective on our subject to be gained from

### **The Pages of History**

In NT times ministry was a function of the Body of Christ, each member having gifts to employ.

From the first century to the fifteenth something else developed. A church of high priestly people gave way to downgrading under a high priestly class; this crystallized in the tenet: “*Duo sunt genera Christianorum.*” The tautology “laypeople” came into usage and tolerance, in spite of the fact that in the Scriptures *laos* stands for the whole people of God.

In the early years before this degeneration had bottomed, men like Cyprian, Tertullian, and Augustine were given the responsibility of the office of bishop while having been “laymen.” The monastic movement began largely as a “lay” movement.

The situation was such that by the time of Wycliff the universal priesthood had to be rediscovered and repropounded. We recall the Words of Luther such as the following:

On the one hand, he writes (St. L., V, 1038): “As soon as we have become Christians through this Priest [Christ] and His priesthood and in Baptism through faith have been engrafted into Him, we have the right and authority to teach and confess the Word, which we have from Him, before everybody, every one according to his calling and station. For though we are not all in the public office or calling, still every Christian should teach, instruct, exhort, comfort, and reprove his neighbor through God’s Word whenever and wherever any one is in need of it, as a father and mother must do with their children and servants and a brother, neighbor, citizen, or peasant with another. For a Christian can instruct and admonish another who is yet ignorant or weak in the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, etc.; and whoever hears this is in duty bound to receive it from him as God’s Word and to confess it publicly.” (Cf. X, 1590.)

We should also keep in mind that he also clearly maintained the role the called public ministry as distinct from the exercise of the universal priesthood.

However, on the other hand, Luther also writes (St. L., V, 1037): “Though we all are priests, yet we all neither can nor should for this reason preach, teach, or rule. But from the whole throng we must select and choose some to whom we entrust this office; and whoever conducts it is not a priest on account of his office (which they all are), but a servant of all others. And if he can no longer preach or serve, or if he should no longer desire this, he again steps among the common throng, entrusts his office to another, and is nothing else than an ordinary Christian. Thus you must distinguish between the ministry, or the office of service, and the common priesthood of all baptized Christians. For this office is nothing else than a public service, which is entrusted to one by the whole congregation, who are all priests at the same time.” (Cf. X, 1589.)

Application of Luther’s conviction is evident in his “To the Nobility of the German Nation.” At that hectic time he was seeking to stir the leaders of society to action in the life and activity of the church. He was trying to convince laymen that they have rights and responsibilities in the church.

Therefore, when a bishop consecrates it is nothing else than that in the place and stead of the whole community, all of whom have like power, he takes a person and charges him to exercise this power on behalf of the others. It is like ten brothers, all king’s sons and equal heirs, choosing one of themselves to rule the inheritance in the interests of all. In one sense they are all kings and of equal power, and yet one of them is charged with the responsibility of ruling. To put it still more clearly: suppose a group of earnest Christian laymen were taken prisoner and set down in a desert without an episcopally ordained priest among them. And suppose they were to come to a common mind there and then in the desert and elect one of their number, whether he were married<sup>17</sup> or not, and charge him to baptize, say mass, pronounce absolution, and preach the gospel. Such a man would be as truly a priest as though he had been ordained by all the bishops

and popes in the world. That is why in cases of necessity anyone can baptize and give absolution. This would be impossible if we were not all priests. Through canon law<sup>18</sup> the Romanists have almost destroyed and made unknown the wondrous grace and authority of baptism and justification. In times gone by Christians used to choose their bishops and priests in this way from among their own number, and they were confirmed in their office by the other bishops without all the fuss that goes on nowadays. St. Augustine,<sup>19</sup> Ambrose,<sup>20</sup> and Cyprian<sup>21</sup> each became [a bishop in this way].

Since those who exercise secular authority have been baptized with the same baptism, and have the same faith and the same gospel as the rest of us, we must admit that they are priests and bishops and we must regard their office as one which has a proper and useful place in the Christian community. For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope, although of course it is not seemly that just anybody should exercise such office. Because we are all priests of equal standing, no one must push himself forward and take it upon himself, without our consent and election, to do that for which we all have equal authority, For no one dare take upon himself what is common to all without the authority and content of the community. And should it happen that a person chosen for such office were deposed for abuse of trust, he would then be exactly what he was before. Therefore, a priest in Christendom is nothing else but an officeholder. As long as he holds office he takes precedence; where he is deposed, he is a peasant or a townsman like anybody else. Indeed, a priest is never a priest when he is deposed. But now the Romanists have invented *characteres indelebiles*<sup>22</sup> and say<sup>23</sup> that a deposed priest is nevertheless something different from a mere layman. They hold the illusion that a priest can never be anything other than a priest, or ever become a layman. All this is just contrived talk, and human regulation.

It follows from this argument that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work, but not for the sake of status. They are all of the spiritual estate, all are truly priests, bishops, and popes. But they do not all have the same work to do.

Luther points up the role-of the universal priesthood and that of the called ministers. They do not have to be in conflict.

Unfortunately the restored status of the universal priesthood in the church of the Reformation turned out to be something more of a banner than a force. The Lutheran churches operated largely as *Pastorenkirchen* under territorial hierarchies. The historians point to a number of circumstances over which Luther had no control:

- The Reformation was of necessity reactionary and polemical; emphasis was on correction rather than on development.
- People had been kept abysmally immature and they could in no way suddenly function as mature priests of God.
- Many, sad to say, were only nominally members of the Body of Christ.
- The shadow of the feudal system was still over society.
- There had to be emphasis on the teaching function on the part of the “knowers,” and this tended to foster passivity on the part of the learners.

The State-Church milieu, as well as a Thirty Years War, did little to foster any planned development of the exercise of the universal priesthood.

The first organizations of Lutheranism in the new world consisted of ministers who organized themselves as ministeria, not as congregations of self-governing congregations. There had not been

voters' assemblies in the old country. This was to be a later development, a product of the democratic climate of the frontier.

A symptomatic sacerdotalism plagued Lutheranism. It came to the surface in the methods of men like Grabau who insisted on private absolution, and who once took it upon himself unilaterally to excommunicate the entire Missouri Synod.

In Synodical Conference circles lay participation in the work of the church was patronizingly referred to as a tolerable "outlet for their interests."

But the function of Christ's royal priesthood was not buried. After all, it had been laymen who added their signatures to the Augsburg Confession. Much of the mission work of the nineteenth century had been lay motivated and supported. In the 1930's J. T. Mueller wrote:

"Already Luther called attention to the fact that 'the world may become so utterly epicurean that upon the whole earth there will be no public ministry at all, but that the Gospel will be preserved alone in homes through Christian fathers.' (St. L., VI 938) Also through the study of the Bible by individual believers Christ's church may be preserved, and spread on earth." (Christian Dogmatics p.569)

We are told that when the churches of Silesia lost 99% of their pastors in WWII, the church not only survived, but grew because of the work of the laity.

Luther and Lutherans do not necessarily see the exercise by individual priests of their priesthood in their private lives in conflict with the principle that the public ministry is conferred on a called minister by a calling body which possess the ministry of the keys.

We take the position on the basis of the foregoing sections that the individual priest in the exercise of his or her personal Christianity does not function only by authority of his organized congregation.

Parachurch or paraparish activities of individual believers, or of individual believers joined with others, in areas that are not in the work of the congregation(s) need not be viewed as suspect or unbiblical just because they are unauthorized – or even unconventional.

## **Our Situation**

It is the opinion or observation of this writer that we have historically been in the camp of those who are weak on encouraging the exercise of the priesthood of all believers. When I entered the ministry, I cannot recall that I regarded as a very high priority the responsibility for equipping the saints for their ministry. Possibly as a consequence we have been more wary that others of lay or parachurch activities that are not cast in the mold of what has been conventional among us.

One of the elements that one runs across is that we have equated the Body of Christ with the local congregation in the application of the passages about the gifts of the Spirit. By extension this may be logical, but it blurs the subject we are dealing with.

Another element: We rightfully espouse an anti *Social-gospel* position and eschew social-gospel ministry. Is it possible that in our desire to keep clean in this regard we are lapsing into an attitude that comes off as advocating an *anti-social* gospel? We are more comfortable if our people keep their hands off social causes that concern parachurch organizations. Are we tending to become callused about "passing by on the other side?" Maybe parachurch life can help correct that.

Have we misemphasized the matter of what the Church's *call is not*, so that men and women in God's family have lost sight of what *their call is*? Does this carry over in the form of being suspect of the objectives of parachurch activities? One still hears justification for slighting outreach on the grounds of questioning whether we have a call go out. I can recall back in the 40's during my college years

influential voices in our synod disparaged the Lutheran Hour on the grounds that we didn't have a call to do such wholesale preaching to a non-congregation.

Our aversion or fear for getting involved sometimes seemed to reveal an attitude that understands "Preach the Gospel" as meaning only from a pulpit – by a called preacher. Thus vines that could be bearing fruit in the Lord's vineyard have been stunted.

This writer submits that there not only is room for parachurch, for some parachurch, paraparish, activities; there may also be need.

Indeed in some cases it may be a matter of tolerating a fifth wheel, but in others it ought perhaps be an matter of encouraging, aiding, edifying.

Are there dangers in proliferation of organizations? Of course. There is the matter of limited man-hours, the matter of questionable priorities, etc., but there is danger the other way too. Dangers of motivated, gifted, saints of God being thwarted; dangers that unreached remain unreached by the organized church, when individual believers might have been able to infiltrate the world of the agnostic and the "turned-off," if they had been equipped and encouraged.

Perhaps the greatest potential for reaching the unchurched today is through what is being called "friendship evangelism." It revolves around the people of God exercising their love for the lost and their knowledge and faith in Christ – outside the church.

Is there a concern that if a member has an imperfect understanding of the kenosis it would be better if he kept quiet about Jesus rather than speak to his unchurched neighbors? That should not be brushed aside. The answer is not muzzling, but equipping.

What is the impact ? How about what the impact might well be:

1. Spur us to new emphasis of what the church(es) ought to be doing?
2. Force us to study, establish and articulate priorities for the 80's.
3. Determine what necessary efforts might be the province of parachurch activities and which remain the province of congregations and the Synod.
4. Step up our efforts to show individual Christians what their calling is as "light and salt," and then to devote more time and attention to equipping them for those functions that are most vital.

## CHAPTER 4

I, THEREFORE, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,

2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love,

3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;

5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

7 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

8 Therefore it says,

“WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH,  
HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES,  
AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN.”

9 (Now this *expression*, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth?)

10 He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

11 And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers,

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;

13 until we attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ.

14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;

15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him, who is the head, *even* Christ,

16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

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